Charlie & Stella

BROWN

Front cover:
Charlie and Stella Brown, just after they were married October 29, 1910.

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Keepsake No. 19. Tony Kroll, Editor
Published for the 30th Annual Encampment of the
Death Valley 49ers, November 8 to 11, 1979
Death Valley, California

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Dedicated to

BERNICE SORRELS

Board Member
of the Death Valley 49ers,
Benefactor and Counselor
to the people of
Death Valley

Charlie and Stella Brown at the Inaugural Ball for Governor Olson, 1939. Charlie was state senator representing the 28th district which at that time included Inyo, Mono, and Alpine counties.

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SHE WAS SIXTEEN. He was twenty-six. She was from a large, prosperous family, and because of her charm and beauty she was everyone's favorite. He left his home in Georgia at the age of eleven and knew what it meant to be hungry. In 1907 they met in Greenwater, a copper-crazed boomtown on the edge of Death Valley. No one knew Charlie Brown, yet everyone respected him. He was famous for his soft-spoken justice and his habit of keeping a promise, especially to the hardened outlaws who were drawn to boomtowns like iron to a magnet. Because of these qualities the citizens of Greenwater asked Charlie to be sheriff, an office he accepted as he was to accept other offices throughout his life. Stella, too, was well known throughout the region but for different reasons. It wasn't simply her beauty that created so many admirers. It was also her gentle acceptance of each person as a human being, be he a prospector out of luck or a prestigious mining mogul from the big city.

Charlie Brown on porch of cabin at Greenwater, ca. 1909.

Townsite office, Greenwater, 1907 (Furnace Camp).

The official story is that they met through Stella's father, Dad Fairbanks, the only freighter in Greenwater. At a time when there were no roads and no completed railroads to Death Valley, Dad Fairbanks and his 18-horse team were the only link with civilization. But Dad played an even more important role in the boomtown: he was an ace poker player who was known to keep a game straight. Contrary to the official version, it is whispered that Stella was sent by her mother to tell her father to come home for dinner. Stella's tactic was to wait for the tall Georgian outside a gambling hall to ask him to deliver the message to her father who was running a poker game inside. Although Stella's actions were contrary to social prescription, in a sense she was simply following her mother's example. At that time women were divided into two categories, "good" and "bad," and a "good" woman never went near a saloon. Stella, however, had learned to defy this division between women from her mother, Celesta Abigail Fairbanks. Celesta had only one female companion in Greenwater, Diamond Tooth Lil, the proprietress of the saloon with all its embellishments. Because social pressure made it impossible for these two very different women to meet in public, they met in a gulch on the outskirts of town. The friendship between them grew even after they had left Greenwater. Lil, knowing the preferences of Celesta, sent her an expensive corset from San Francisco as a token of their affection for one another. Through this friendship between Celesta and Lil, Stella knew as much about the gambling halls as did her father and Charlie Brown.

Celesta and Dad Fairbanks tending their flock of chickens in Shoshone, 1920.

Raising hay in Shoshone in 1915.

Photograph of Stella Brown while she was living in Dale, California, 1914.

Celesta Fairbanks making a rug.

"Dad" R. J. Fairbanks in Shoshone, 1923, Charles Brown on right. Charlie took visitors on tours of Death Valley.

Charlie Brown and his son George on their way to a county supervisors' meeting, George wearing a cap because his father shaved his head for summer. Ca. 1925.

Stella Brown and sister-in-law Cleo Fairbanks riding donkeys in Shoshone, 1910.

Stella Brown taking a break from cooking at the boardinghouse in Shoshone.

Fifty years later so much had changed, yet nothing changed. Even though Stella's parents had sent her away to school in Utah to discourage her growing love for Charlie, they became man and wife. Instead of living in Greenwater where water was sold, they lived in Shoshone, a desert oasis. Modern roads and airports now revealed the wonders of Death Valley to the most timid traveler, and gave the residents easier access to hospitals and other of life's amenities. Children no longer went away for their education but attended schools in Death Valley. Instead of being the sheriff of Greenwater, Charlie Brown was a State Senator and an influential member of the powerful Rules and Finance Committees. He no longer was the man from nowhere; he now was a father revered by four children and a host of grandchildren. From this family nucleus of love and security his fame had spread across the state. His early life on the road, his inner strength then being his only support, revealed to him the hardships the common man faces. These early experiences not only gave him an understanding of the joy and sorrow of life, they also fired the clay of his character. His integrity was steadfast. Although a view or two of his could be called an historical accident, he never let these views rest. He continually questioned their value, his overriding concern being the welfare and happiness of people. Because of his integrity and intelligence he was loved and respected in the legislature by the "Young Turks" and the "Old Guard" alike. His dry desert wit and his knowledge of human nature further distinguished him as an extraordinary human being. His legislation reflected his priorities: he stressed

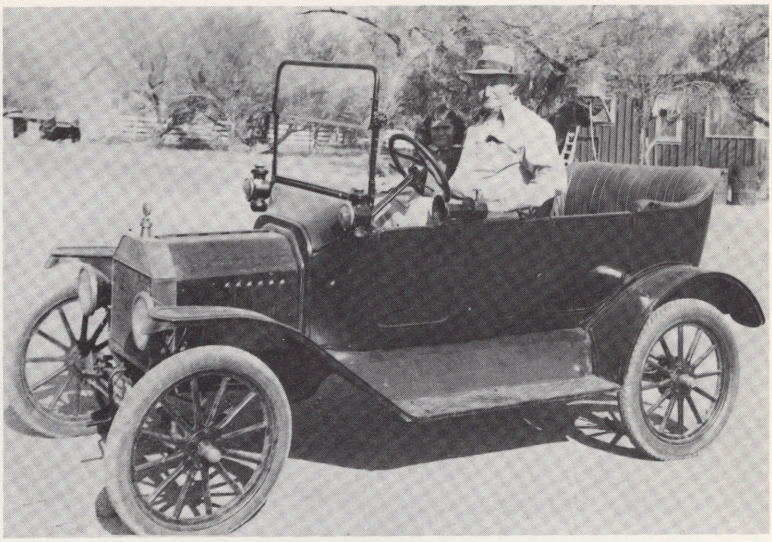
Stella Brown, with Charles Brown, Jr., and Bernice (now Sorrells) on a burro, Dale, California.

Stella Brown, front left, and Nina Warren, center, at a gathering in Sacramento.

rural education, health, and transportation. He also was concerned with the preservation of natural resources. Having been a Supervisor of Inyo County for fifteen years, before being elected to the Senate as a representative of Inyo, Mono, and Alpine counties, he was incensed by the slow destruction of Owens Valley by the diversion of its water to Los Angeles. In confronting issues like this one he gladly was the antagonist of powerful political foes.

And Stella? In many ways her contributions were as lasting as Charlie's, but, as often was the case before the 1960s, her contributions were not so readily visible. Her keen understanding of the problems of rural America, such as education and health care, was intensified by her deep friendship with old and young, rich and poor throughout the desert. The personal experiences of her family and her friends brought home to Stella in human terms the need for successful social programs. She constantly was expressing her observations to Charlie. But she had another source of insight as well. The wives of political figures like Nina Warren and Virginia Knight shared with Stella social concerns, and these women often exchanged information and ideas. Through these friendships Stella, like Charlie, was aware of the problems, and the solutions, evolving throughout the state.

But so much remained the same. Each spring the soft scent of purple sage still harkened the transformation of the desert into an explosion of greenery. The scent of sage still was followed by the heavy aroma of blooming tamarisks and later by the sweet smell of mesquite. The presence of the bright yellow mesquite blooms assured that the days



Charlie Brown in Shoshone in a 1915 Model T Ford.

Charlie Brown unloading a T & T railroad car in Shoshone.

Charlie Brown and his grandson, Charles Sorrells, after duck hunting, in front of Charlie Brown's home.

were now hot, but that the evenings were cool and long, a twilight intensified by the fragrance of spring. It is this desert environment of harsh beauty which does not change, yet constantly changes, that gives a hint of who Charlie and Stella were.

They came to Shoshone in 1920, eleven years after they had left Greenwater and ten years after they had become man and wife. They were the parents of three children, Bernice and Charles, who were born in Dale, California, and George, who was born in Tonapah, Nevada. Stella gave birth to a fourth child, Celestia May, in Shoshone.

The *Tonapah & Tidewater* railroad was now completed, and the arrival and departure of the train was the highlight of the day. Dad Fairbanks ran the boardinghouse for the railroad as well as a store and a motel. The railroad was the only link with other towns, so the residents of Shoshone had to be self-reliant for many of their needs. As a result everyone worked, the women, the children, and the men. The men constructed the skeleton of the town, the buildings and the waterlines, while the women produced the food and the clothing. The children assisted wherever they were needed. Because the area was so unusual, the men had to confront problems in an unusual way. It was not surprising then, that Dad Fairbanks, being a bit of a dreamer anyway, installed a hot water heater powered by the sun long before solar energy was a popular idea.

The women, too, had to be creative in their work. They made all the clothes by hand in addition to making all the linens for the motel and the boardinghouse. As soon as the clothes were worn out, the women transformed these rags

Indian children at the original schoolhouse in Shoshone, 1925.

into new rugs. Nothing was wasted; instead thrift became an art form. The rugs were exquisite. Even during idle conversation the women knitted. Time too was precious.

Food also presented a serious problem. Although some of the supplies arrived by the *Tonapah & Tidewater* railroad, the mainstay was provided locally. Celesta had a flock of chickens that produced eggs, meat, and down for pillows, while Dad Fairbanks tended the hogs. The children, too, made their contribution. They gathered mesquite beans, an indigenous fodder, for the animals. After the hogs were butchered, Celesta and Stella made soap from the lard. Duck, rabbit, and frog legs were also a part of their daily fare. Neither were fruits and vegetables lacking. The Paiute, who lived throughout the region, grew unusually bountiful gardens, and they sold their crops to their neighbors, including Charlie and Stella Brown.

Although it was a struggle even to create the necessities of life, there was always time for people. Every evening a crowd would gather under the tall athol trees to discuss the day's events. Visitors brought news from other areas, while prospectors exchanged information on grubstaking and new claims. The evenings often were enlivened by a poker game or a guitar and a harmonica. These were the happy times. In times of tragedy people again were the first priority. There were days when word would reach Shoshone of a luckless person facing imminent death. Dad Fairbanks, who had learned untold secrets of the desert from the Paiutes, was able to rescue these unfortunate travelers without endangering his own life. Charlie too rescued many a wayfarer, and at times Stella's house

The Brown family in front of the General Store in Shoshone. From right to left: Charlie, Charles Jr., Bernice, Stella, George, and Celestia May.

Senator Charlie Brown on the floor of the Senate with Governor Pat Brown.

resembled a hospital rather than a home. The value of life overrode all other values in times of celebration and in times of heartache.

Soon after Charlie moved to Shoshone he sensed another kind of destruction that was just as deadly, although slower, than that of the desert's heat, the destruction wrought by ignorance. Perhaps because Charlie never had the opportunity to go to school himself, one of his first endeavors in Shoshone was to establish a school. As soon as word of the school had spread throughout the region, several Paiute families moved to Shoshone to give their children the benefit of an education. These children joined the Brown children to become the school's first class. Charlie and Stella paid the salary of the teacher until the county could be persuaded to support the position.

Through experiences like these Charlie Brown soon learned the importance of political representation, so in 1924 he ran for supervisor and was elected. But in order to attend each meeting in Independence he traveled over 1,000 miles. His usual route was via Los Angeles. He would take the *Tonapah & Tidewater* railroad to Crucero, where he would transfer to a train going to Los Angeles. From Los Angeles he would catch a train to Independence. His son, George, often accompanied him on these trips. Stella's dedication was no less inspiring. While Charlie was away her work doubled, in the home, in the business and in the community. But she always had time to enjoy the sweetness of life and the camaraderie of her neighbors. Because of her intelligence and her natural goodness of heart she understood their fears and their aspirations, and

she helped each one of them develop his own talents, just as she was helping her husband.

And so on the edge of Death Valley where Nature respects only those who know Her secrets, two unusual human beings met and prospered. They prospered in knowing from their close association with Nature that only those who give more than they receive truly live. They prospered in a depth of spirit that allowed them to transcend limits imposed by a rugged and treacherous, yet beautiful, environment. In prospering they made life richer for us all.

Charles Brown when first an Inyo County supervisor, 1924, in Shoshone.

Printed by
Grant Dahlstrom
at the
Castle Press,
Pasadena